

DE HAAN & ASSOCIATES, LLC.

Region 5 Final Report

Internal Management Consultation

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Background

Between January and June of 2008, four maltreatment related child fatalities occurred in families known to the Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) Children's Administration in Pierce County. These unusual events were preceded by a highly visible, non-fatal case in 2007 which prompted community members, most notably law enforcement, to publicly question the agency's ability to protect children in Pierce County. At the same time, within DSHS, questions arose as to whether the leadership team in the region was doing enough to protect children (See Appendix A for a summary of events). Within the Children's Administration (CA) there was a prevailing view that Region 5 staff (Pierce and Kitsap Counties) staff had, over time, developed divergent risk assessment practices. Further, leaders in DSHS and CA expressed concern about the region's willingness to accept feedback, both from the community and staff in the state office.

Nancy Sutton, the Regional Administrator (RA) and Randy Hart, then the Interim Director for Field Operations crafted a two pronged approach to systematically review external variables contributing to the spike in child fatalities and to get an outside opinion on the internal operations of the region. The two approaches, a community assessment, and an internal organizational assessment were handled as two separate and discrete activities. However, it should be noted that a number of external key informants were interviewed as a part of the internal review process.

CA in Region 5 initiated the internal organizational assessment, creating a charter for the project in July 2008. The contract for the internal review was not completed until six months later due to the severe budget downturn and the resulting statewide hold on all personal services contracts. Once the internal review began, the project completion date was postponed at the request of the Governor's office to allow this consultant to handle another high priority project.

The delays from inception to completion actually proved to be fortuitous for a number of reasons. The consultant's exposure to the regional leadership team covered a longer time span, thus allowing a more extensive review of management practices and a better opportunity to directly observe the results of a number of changes already underway. Also, the passage of

time created a better context for understanding the spike in child fatalities, and the other types of complex cases about which Children's Administration and the community was concerned.

The Region 5 review relied upon direct observations from key informants, one-on-one interviews with the entire leadership team, and focus groups with direct service staff. The leadership interviews and the focus groups were conducted in March and April of 2009 at a time when many of the structural changes related to the creation of the Pierce East and West offices were still in play¹. The physical relocation of staff was not yet completed and basic infrastructure issues were still on the minds of many. At the time, CA staff statewide was also struggling with the roll -out of FamLink, the new SACWIS system (State Automated Child Welfare Information System).

Also, during the organizational analysis, a number of changes occurred within the agency at the state level. A new Secretary of DSHS was appointed, a new Assistant Secretary for Children's Administration replaced Randy Hart who had served as the Interim Assistant Secretary during most of the review period, and a great deal of administrative attention was turned towards new highly visible issues in other parts of the state.

Despite these changes, the Region 5 leadership has remained strongly committed to the review process, using it as an opportunity to get an unbiased assessment of the region's practices.

Nancy Sutton's authentic commitment to objectively reviewing the Region's practices was communicated unequivocally to the Region's leadership team. From this consultant's perspective, Ms. Sutton's unwavering support created an environment in which candid discussion was not only tolerated, it was expected.

Early in the review process, Ms. Sutton made the decision to act on new information as it arose rather than wait for a report with a series of recommendations. Many of the suggestions included in the recommendations below were discussed informally and are already in progress.

¹ The 270 employee Tacoma field office was divided into two Pierce County field offices that conduct child protection investigations and child welfare services plus a centralized services office that provides Intake, child placement and relative support services to both Pierce and Kitsap counties.

Review Process

One of the biggest challenges facing an outside reviewer is creating an environment in which participants are comfortable speaking candidly about the strengths and weaknesses of their organizations. Often participants are concerned about inadvertently damaging their professional reputations or appearing too harsh in their criticisms of colleagues and/or supervisors. At the same time, participants are usually eager to express their views and to hear the views of others once assurances are given that they will not be directly quoted.

Confidentiality must be balanced with the competing need to substantiate recommendations/observations without direct attribution. Traditionally, this is accomplished by reporting out observations thematically---or stated another way, when a number of key players in the organizations independently make the same observations or report similar conclusions. Of course, these observations may not be accurate or actionable. Obviously, if perceptions and beliefs are pervasive throughout an organization, the veracity of the claims is less important than the organizational conditions in which misperceptions flourish.

All participants were given assurances that they would not be quoted without permission. Therefore, observations in all venues are reported thematically (as discussed above) with no direct attribution to individuals. It should be noted that “ themes” were reported only if they were developed by multiple participants. Outlying, or extreme views held by a single individual are excluded.

Methods and Data Sources

The focus areas for the review were initially identified in a charter created by the Region 5 administrator in consultation with state office. Later these were modified in discussions between the consultant and regional leadership. Participants in the stakeholder interviews identified additional areas to be explored. The following list of questions emerged:

- How effective is the current leadership team?
- Is the CA Region 5 leadership on the correct path to creating a culture where child safety is the highest priority goal?
- Are there sufficient planning mechanisms?
- What are the methods for assuring quality and consistency in approach to services?
- Is staff receptive to outside ideas regarding their child welfare practice?

- What role do supervisors play in practice consistency and training?
- Are additional structural changes indicated?
- How are expectations communicated to staff throughout the organization?
- How effective are the channels of communication with community stakeholders and policy makers?
- What strategies are necessary to improve communications with Children's Administration state office?
- What could/should the relationship be with legislators and other policy-makers?
- Does Region 5 have different metrics regarding child safety/removal decisions
- How clear are the regional priorities?
- What was the impact of the structural changes which created the East and West Pierce county offices and other changes in Kitsap County?

Data for the review were gathered as follows:

1. **Key informant interviews** were conducted in February of 2009 with a number of stakeholders selected by the consultant. Participants included: Robin Arnold-Williams, former Secretary of DSHS; Kari Burrell, Policy Advisor to Governor Christine Gregoire; State Representative Ruth Kagi, Cheryl Stephani, former Assistant Secretary, Children's Administration; Mary Meinig, Office of the Family and Children's Ombudsman, Sharon Gilbert, Deputy Director, Field Operations, Children's Administration, and Randy Hart, former Interim Asst. Secretary, Children's Administration.
2. **Structured Individual Interviews** were held on March 10th and 11th of 2009, with each member of the Regional Executive Leadership team (Appendix B). Participants responded to twelve prepared questions which were linked conceptually to the areas identified above (Appendix C). Questions 1 through 4 dealt with leadership orientation and accountability; questions 5, 6 and 7 focused on practice philosophy and consistency; question 8 dealt with access to work-related information; question 9 asked respondents for their judgment about community expectations of DCFS; question 10 asked respondents to identify areas requiring change; question 11 addressed regional effectiveness and question 12, the final interview question asked for perceptions of regional organizational culture.
3. **Focus Groups** with a randomly selected stratified sample of direct service staff (Appendix D) were conducted on April 20, 21st and 22nd of 2009. DCFS direct service staff

were interviewed in Tacoma and Bremerton using a traditional focus group format. Group participants were selected by the consultant from an organizational chart, representing all service units in both Kitsap and Pierce counties. The sample included approximately 65 participants, none of whom were known to the consultant. Six focus groups, comprised of ten to eleven participants each, were conducted over two days by a single facilitator (Benjamin de Haan). All groups responded to a standardized set of questions using the same group protocols (see Appendix E). Groups were scheduled for 1.5 hours, although many ran well over the allotted time. Participants were given assurances that the information from focus groups would be organized thematically and there would be no individual attributions. Each group responded to eight questions. Questions 1 and 2 dealt with perceived strengths and weakness in the region's approach to child welfare services; question 3 pertained to individual perceptions of support to do their job; question 4 addressed the workers understanding of and commitment to the current practice model (Solution Based Casework); question 5 addressed the perceived effects of the recent restructure; question 6 addressed the clarity of expectations and the role of supervision; question 7 was related to practice consistency and the final question dealt with cultural and class bias in child welfare services. At the end of each session participants were also encouraged to add anything overlooked in the earlier discussion.

4. A review of a variety of internal documents

Results

Key Informant Themes

- Key informants believe that Region 5 is demographically and culturally distinct from the other regions in the state in that the region is more likely to produce complex cases which lead to controversy in the community.
- These perceived demographic differences, combined with the region's historical insularity have affected the public's confidence in the statewide consistency and predictability of the public child welfare system.
- Region 5's child welfare practices have been at variance with the other regions and inconsistent with statewide norms; this will take time to mitigate.

- The Regional Administrator has taken a number of important steps by asking for outside feedback and participation. Additional external participation in the region is necessary to increase staff receptivity to new practice concepts.
- Smaller more community oriented offices and a renewed focus on child protection are steps in the right direction.
- There is a renewed emphasis on child safety and partnerships with local communities in responding to child maltreatment. This is welcomed but could have occurred earlier.
- The Regional Administrator knows what good child welfare practice is; she has high standards. She is willing to stand up for what is right and she has made some tough decisions.
- External partners have felt a palpable shift in the attitudes of the regional staff. They are more willing to listen to other's points of view, and it appears they are making major improvements with community interest groups.
- Another high visibility case is inevitable. State leaders should resist the temptation to make unilateral decisions affecting the region or state based upon one case unless it is representative of a pattern in practice that must immediately be addressed.
- Strengthening the existing team and establishing more effective quality assurance and training is a more effective long term strategy

Consultant's Observations:

- By all accounts a great deal of progress has been made in the area of community relations. A concerted effort is underway to assess the factors leading to fatalities, and to increase the dialogue with community members and the state office regarding practice improvement. Recent structural changes, and more clarifying expectations for regional staff regarding community engagement are positive steps.
- Key informants still lack current information about the region. Some are acting on old information and beliefs.
- Community partners and state leaders are currently distracted by larger organizational issues (new leadership, performance based contracting, the budget deficit, and cases in other regions) but no one has forgotten the political turmoil of two years ago.
- The development of community and legislative relationships has been hampered by ambiguity at the state level about how local community and legislative relationships should be managed. Many field employees believe that it is the exclusive responsibility of CA state office to work with legislators and local working relationships

with legislators are discouraged. Some legislators interpret reticence on part of field staff as a lack of appreciation for legislators rather than ambiguity in the leadership responsibilities for communicating with legislators.

Region 5 Leadership Team Interviews

For the most part, the regional leadership team members participated energetically and candidly, with many participants requesting additional follow-up time. The interview themes expressed by the leadership team, are summarized in four general categories: Organizational Culture; Leadership and Team Dynamics; Practice Philosophy; and External Relationships:

A. Organizational Culture

- The team acknowledges that the region has been historically resistant to outside ideas and there is strong desire to create an organizational culture that is more receptive.
- The team recognizes that the region has developed a crisis oriented culture, one that is more focused on fixing mistakes than preventing them.
- There is a great deal of fear, at all levels in the organization. Leaders understand that because child protection and child welfare services require predictions about human behavior, mistakes are inevitable. They are concerned that the regional leadership team may not be able to influence the political consequences of mistakes.

B. Leadership and Team Dynamics

- With few exceptions, managers see themselves as critical thinkers and leaders within their individual spheres of influence, not simply implementers of initiatives from above. They believe they have a high level of flexibility within the region for developing strategies that implement state policy and they believe they have the ability to personally influence their work.
- The business office should be more engaged in the region's planning process by bringing budget and business tools into better alignment with program planning and decision-making. This requires additional skills beyond monitoring financial transactions and avoiding fiscal mistakes.
- The Deputy Administrator's position could be better utilized. The Deputy RA has a variety of assignments and is seen as a supportive member of the team, but the position could focus more on the overall administration of the Region.

- The Regional Administrator's expectations are exceedingly high and not everyone can meet these expectations.
- The recent restructure (creation of the East and West Pierce offices) will require a much higher level of coordination among the team. Some relationships within the teams must be strengthened for the region to be successful.

C. Practice Philosophy

- The Region 5 leadership team has a high level of child welfare experience and strongly held beliefs about what progressive child welfare practices should include. There is a strong, authentic commitment to helping children and families.
- The leadership team is very clear that child safety is the highest priority for the region and the state.
- The leadership team acknowledges there are substantial differences in day to day practice decisions among the team members and probably though out the region. They believe this is an area of concern for staff at all levels in the Region. The team is unclear about what systems are necessary to ensure practice consistency.
- The Solution Based Casework (SBC) practice model may eventually reduce variation in practice but the team believes there is still a great deal of work needed for successful implementation. The team is concerned that that direct service staff doesn't understand and use the SBC principles consistently. This has been exacerbated by delays in training for solution based casework and problems with the implementation of the new data system.

D. Managing External Relationships

- The team members generally believe that their accomplishments are not fully recognized by external stakeholders (this impression was supported in the key informant interviews and in the focus groups)
- Team members recognize the importance of developing strong external relationships with legislators, the community, and state office but they are not clear about the best approach and what limitations have been placed on these activities at the state level. Some team members suggested training and coaching in this area to help the team develop the necessary skills.
- There is a pervasive belief among the team that the community knows very little about child welfare services, but most community members would have a negative view of the role of the agency.

- The team would like to see a clear plan for community and external partner engagement which included ways to measure progress.

Consultant's Observations:

- In general, this is a very strong team with good subject area expertise. The team is technically and procedurally oriented; generally, team members held a more limited view of political dynamics and the “bigger picture” leadership issues.
- There is a pressing need for further development in: planning and tracking outcomes, community outreach and managing relationships with external partners.
- The Deputy RA position should be the RA’s largest asset in moving an agenda and freeing up the RAs time to work externally and to do high level planning.
- More attention to communications across the new Pierce offices will be particularly important with close coordination of interactions with shared community partners; preventing the divergence of separate Pierce East and Pierce West practice cultures must be an important focus for the regional leadership team.
- Team members widely acknowledge divergent practices within units in assessing risk. This variation is attributed to different levels of experience and practice values among the supervisors and AAs.
- Systematic approaches to quality assurance are very limited due to lack of time, lack of current outcome data, and the learning curve associated with the new SACWIS system.
- The fear of unmanageable political consequences as a result of an inevitable mistake was expressed by key informants, regional leaders and direct services workers. This pervasive belief must be addressed before any organizational change effort can be successful.

Staff Focus Groups

The staff focus groups were conducted over a period of three days in both the Bremerton and the East and West Pierce County offices. Even though the focus group protocols included assurances about confidentiality in the reporting process, there was very little concern expressed about fear of recrimination or reluctance to express unpopular views. The candor and enthusiasm the participants brought to the groups was constructive and surprising. By and large participants were very engaged and solution oriented. Many of the group participants

moved very quickly to offering specific suggestions once problem areas were identified by other group members.

There were very few differences among the offices regarding content although the Pierce offices were more concerned about change management, overall direction, and clerical support due to the recent changes in office structure. In all three offices, direct service staff opinions and concerns were relatively similar to those expressed by management, only from a different organizational vantage point. The themes expressed by participants in the focus group are summarized in three general categories: organizational climate, approach to working with families, and general communication.

A. Organizational Climate

- Most participants agreed that the agency does excellent work due to staff commitment to working with families despite lack of resources and changing expectations.
- Effectively protecting children while treating families fairly is a widely held value in the region.
- Workers perceive a very high level of support and collegiality from co-workers.
- Communication among front line staff is effective and supportive.
- The region has a culture in which the daily press of business makes longer term planning impossible. One member of a focus group observed that the regional leadership team was “so consumed with managing today, that no one was managing tomorrow.”

B. Approach to Working with Families

- Supervisors are often too busy to be effective at case consultation and providing feedback to workers.
- Workers would like to see more clarity about expectations and more frequent feedback about how their work compares with others.
- Workers believe that they are free to work in ways that are respectful of individual cultural differences.
- Many workers agree that they can predict case direction based upon which unit a case is assigned to (i.e. given similar facts, some units are more likely to seek court involvement, others more likely to offer in-home services and others are more likely to screen cases out)
- Many believe that area administrators need to do more work on resolving practice differences across units.

- Much of the general staff training offered is not seen as helpful. Locally developed training is of higher quality and more relevant to local training needs.
- Staff is very clear that child safety is the highest priority. They are not always clear how to implement that value in complex situations where there are competing recommendations for actions.
- Direct service staff believes that Solution Based Casework (the new practice model) has not had much of an effect yet in creating greater practice consistency. Many believe that the implementation was seriously flawed due to delays in the timing and the quality of the training.

C. Communication

- Workers generally hold the regional leadership team in high regard and recognize that they have a difficult job to do.
- Workers would like the regional leadership team to spend time on the “bigger picture” and on planning for the future.
- The Regional Administrator is seen as approachable and fair but front line staff would like more information about the overall direction she is headed.
- Even though time is scarce, workers would like greater authentic participation in regional planning activities and work groups.
- FamLink has had a pronounced, negative effect on workers ability to get their job done.
- The creation of the two Pierce offices was poorly implemented.
- Participants expressed the desire to spend more time engaged in longer term planning, and they particularly wanted more contact with the Regional Administrator.

Consultant’s Observations

- For obvious reasons direct services staff focus largely on caseload and practice issues. However, in these groups, participants were also interested in broader issues including community engagement, planning, workforce development, staff recruitment and the overall function of the regional leadership team.
- In general, workers held the leadership team in high regard, recognizing that they had a very difficult job. As a group, participants believed that, in the event of a “bad case” the leadership team could not “control the political fall-out”.
- Many participants urged the leadership team to be more proactive in developing community relationships that would ultimately make the work safer and more effective.
- The strong concerns about planning expressed by participants were influenced heavily by the timing of the focus groups. At the time, the two Pierce offices were still in

transition and staff was struggling with a new infrastructure and systems. Their new work teams were not yet fully operational and even mundane issues like getting the mail delivered and checking out state vehicles were frustrating the group participants.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are organized in four general areas: Leadership, Community Engagement, Planning and Quality Assurance. By their very nature, recommendations require energy, commitment and a reassessment of priorities not necessarily new resources.

A. Leadership

Ms. Sutton is seen by key informants and her staff as a strong, committed leader who, if given enough time, can make the necessary improvements in the region ... and this consultant concurs.

Key informants have already seen a fair amount of progress, but they would like more detail about the overall direction in which the region is headed. Ms. Sutton's management team has great confidence in her; they believe her expectations are high, but she is fair and balanced in her decisions. Direct service staff holds her in high esteem and she is seen as being approachable but they would like more contact with her; particularly a dialogue around what it means to make child protection the highest priority.

The team itself is comprised of seasoned child welfare professionals, who are learning to work together under a new structure. Their practice values differ since they come from diverse organizational backgrounds and experiences. The regional administrator is still relatively new to the political process and her direct reports are less experienced in the political arena than many executive teams.

There is a recurring theme in the interviews and in the focus groups that Region 5 has historically resisted new ideas from outside the region. This insularity has resulted in damaged relationships and fueled the belief that the region's child welfare practices are inconsistent with other regions and state-wide norms. As one employee phrased it: "we have been guilty of arrogance and guilty of thinking that we have all the answers".

The leadership team has placed great emphasis on openness and transparency over the last two years and these changes have been recognized and well received by those interviewed outside the agency. However, within the region, involvement by legislators or other state level officials is still viewed as a volatile and unpredictable aspect of high profile cases. From a historical perspective, outside involvement, particularly about case decisions, has led to people losing their jobs or otherwise being discredited. Line staff is not certain the regional leadership team will be able to manage these interests. The following actions are recommended:

- 1. Strengthen the Deputy Regional Administrator position** to operate in a more explicit leadership capacity within the team. This would allow the number two position to make decisions, and act more clearly in the absence of the R.A. thus freeing up the regional administrator to focus on communicating regional goals internally and externally. The deputy administrator could also take the lead on establishing a more systematic quality assurance/planning process.
- 2. A vacancy in June 2009 in the Business Manager position provides an opportunity** to better integrate budget and business planning in the region's strategic planning. This is particularly crucial if the overall direction is to move services closer to the community, or if there are other structural changes as a result of the state's looming revenue shortfall.
- 3. Assess the overlapping responsibility of two managers in Bremerton.** While it is understood that there is more work than a single AA can handle, reassignment of duties in support of the region may be possible.
- 4. A concerted training effort is also needed** to familiarize the rest of the team with the political dynamics at the state legislature, the role the agency leaders play vis a vis the governor's office, and the role of community advocacy in improving child welfare services.
- 5. Overcoming the perception that the region is not amenable to new ideas** will take time and persistence. Inviting other regional staff and practice consultants to the table, modeling openness and inclusiveness to staff, setting expectations for increased openness with the executive team, and avoiding defensiveness during the inevitable outside reviews will ultimately pay dividends.
- 6. Performance/outcomes (progress towards goals) could be shared more widely and routinely.** As an example another child welfare agency with whom I am working is now

publishing performance measures monthly directly on the web and encouraging feedback about how to get better results.

7. A dedicated effort to sharing written strategic plans with stakeholders, continuing public discussion about policy will also go a long way to closing the gap between how the region now conducts business, the current accomplishments and the perceptions from the past.

C. Community Engagement

As in most child welfare agencies there is a pervasive belief within the region that the community does not understand what the agency does. The most obvious question is: why would they? Child welfare practice is complicated and the agency affects only a very small number of children in the community. If a single case can seriously erode public support, it follows that building community and political capital should be one of the most important activities for all public child welfare employees from direct service workers to the head of the agency. The following actions are recommended:

- 1. Devise a method to obtain baseline measures of the community's understanding of the agency's work.** Key informants could include: judges, law enforcement, foster parents, educators, elected officials, parents who have received child welfare services, foster youth, and other community leaders. Questions should be geared to gather information on: what they know about the agency, what they would like to know, where they get their information, and how well the agency is doing from their perspective.
- 2. Develop a written communication plan with measurable communications goals.** This plan should also define a limited number of key messages and assign responsibility for managing and prioritizing relationships with community stakeholders. When one considers the number of interactions each day between CA staff and the community, the opportunity to get key messages out that the agency would like stakeholders to know is enormous.
- 3. Create a simple community survey and develop a consistent schedule for administering it.** This could take the form of a simple "report card" in which community members rate the agency on a small number of issues. These measures could potentially be included on agency regional dashboard.
- 4. Identify additional "listening posts"** where community players have an opportunity to interact regularly with key regional personnel.

5. **Recognize staff** for outstanding contributions to community outreach activities
6. **Children's Administration should include community organizing and relationship building skills in the training academy for new staff and newly promoted supervisors and managers.**
7. **Emphasize community organizing and relationship building skills** in the individual performance plans for key staff.

D. Planning

Staff at all levels and external stakeholders would like to see a more formalized planning process with a focus on longer term issues. One example given was the connection between the recent restructure and the longer term plan to place services closer to the community. Staff at all levels are concerned about the lack of clarity regarding the big picture direction, the flow of information, effectiveness of planning, and a clear set of priorities expressed in practical operational terms. Focus groups and interviews both indicated that the basic message from regional leadership is clear: child safety is the highest priority. However, staff and the public need more details about what this means operationally and how it is accomplished and measured. The following actions are recommended:

1. **Assign responsibility to a high level leader for implementing the elements in an integrated strategic plan**, and use the plan to guide subsequent leadership decisions as well as to hold key leaders within the organization accountable.
2. **Consider using an action research model, design teams or some other recognized strategic planning process** to develop a yearly plan of operations and to increase staff participation in decisions.
3. **Further engage staff at all levels in authentic planning processes**

D. Quality Assurance

Direct service workers, executive members and outside stakeholders all agree that there is a very high level of variation in practices across organizational units. The following actions are recommended:

1. **Create and maintain a *current* child outcomes dashboard.** One such model uses the instrument cluster on an automobile as a metaphor. A limited number of gauges offer the most

critical information to the driver without overwhelming him/her with interesting but non-critical information. As an example; some child welfare agencies have created dashboards which include data already collected for federal purposes such as:

- Time to permanence;
- Placement stability;
- Number of relative placements;
- Re-abuse rates.

Others have used more specific data like:

- Disproportionality data at key decision points
- Placement with relatives at first removal
- Number of schools attended

The Region 5 dashboard should be constructed with specific regional and statewide goals in mind, rather than simply collecting data that is readily available.

2. Create and maintain a separate dashboard for mission critical internal functions that reflects information necessary at multiple levels in the organization. These dashboards usually focus on critical internal business processes which can be identified through a formal approach often referred to a *business process mapping*. Examples could include timeliness of court reports, processing of payments to vendors, completion of performance appraisals, number of community meetings, etc.

3. Assign responsibility for quality assurance functions at or near the top of the regional organization.

4. Create a specific quality assurance strategy using case vignettes to reduce/ explain variation in practice. Results can be used to increase practice consistency with supervisors and AAs. Information derived from these activities can also shape training curricula at the state and regional level

Conclusion

Most seasoned administrators have learned that moving the boxes around in the organizational chart is sometimes necessary; but it often comes with a high price in terms of organizational focus, efficiency and staff morale. In many instances, organizations pay this price only to find that they have exchanged one set of problems for another. For Children's Administration

Region 5, an increased emphasis within the leadership team on quality assurance, communication, community engagement, and planning (rather than additional structural changes) would be the most effective pathway to organizational success.

Without exception, child welfare agencies handle very difficult and complicated cases and all child welfare agencies make mistakes. The chances of making mistakes are reduced only when child welfare leaders create organizational environments in which information is shared freely and child welfare practice approaches are debated without constraints. In addition, all successful child welfare agencies support their decisions with timely, verifiable information and they focus great attention on maintaining strong relationships in the community. The recommendations offered above are rooted in these principles and they are shaped by the specific contributions of a large number of participants in the review.

This report includes 21 separate recommendations, a very large work load for any leadership team. Without additional planning and staff resources, the chances of successful implementation are slim. Given the state's difficult budget climate, additional investment to improve effective planning and quality assurance, regardless of the long term benefit, does not seem likely. Therefore, I would offer the following three priorities: (1) immediately focus on quality assurance, using case vignettes to reduce practice variations particularly in screening decisions; (2) create a specific and measurable community outreach plan and (3) develop and use a regional child outcomes dashboard.

In closing, I would like to thank the participants in this review for their candor, enthusiasm and support during the review process. Regional employees and key informants were all exceedingly generous with their time and forthright with their ideas and perspectives. Despite some variation in opinions and approaches to child welfare practice, the strong commitment to improving services to children and families in the region came through loudly and clearly.